

The Project Surgeon: A Troubleshooter's Guide to Business Crisis Management

By Boris Hornjak

Project Management Institute, 2001

Reviewed by LTC Kenneth H. Rose (USA, Ret.), PMP, a Project Management Instructor for ESI International residing in Hampton, VA, and former member of the Army Acquisition Corps.

Few projects proceed in perfect precision from initiation to completion. What to do when things go wrong is a challenge faced by most project managers at one time or another. In *The Project Surgeon: A Troubleshooter's Guide to Business Crisis Management*, author Boris Hornjak offers a disciplined methodology for putting troubled projects back on track.

According to Hornjak, a good project surgeon will apply three therapies: emergency management, crisis management, and crisis prevention. An emergency is a short-notice situation that demands immediate action to alleviate the current symptoms. A crisis is a long-term situation that requires and allows action to cure the causes. Project managers must deal with both.

In treating troubled projects, Hornjak applies the analogy of medical triage; that is, in situations involving large numbers of injured patients, some will probably survive with little treatment, some will probably survive if treatment is applied soon, and some will probably not survive regardless of any treatment provided. In project terms, he describes three comparable situations: (1) the project can be put back on track within existing resources; (2) the project can be put back on track with the expenditure of additional resources; and (3) the project cannot be put back on track and some kind of failure is inevitable. He defines the boundary between (1) and (2) as the *break-even point* and the boundary between (2) and (3) as the *point of no return*.

The book begins with a review of traditional approaches and their shortcomings. As an alternative, the author offers a five-step framework that departs from the old ways and focuses on competency, urgency, and a project mindset as the means of crisis resolution.

Part I deals with emergency management. Upfront, Hornjak suggests two kinds of emergency responses. A *recovery* operation will put a project back on budget and schedule with or without additional expenditures depending on whether it is undertaken before or after the break-even point. A *salvage* operation occurs after the point of no return and attempts to gain whatever benefits may be possible—anything from cutting the losses to saving the entire project.

Hornjak introduces concepts through a conversational, question-answer format that is particularly user-friendly. His situation analysis method is based on earned value management augmented by several new performance measures such as completion variance, schedule recovery requirement, and schedule recovery index.

In his project triage, he adds a number of metrics, including potential loss, potential interim loss, recovery cost, salvage cost, and final project loss. He manipulates these metrics to produce various indices for further consideration. Hornjak counsels readers to make their best estimate of metric values and move forward to action. Waiting for more precise data can make the situation worse.

Understanding the comprehensive examples requires basic familiarity with spreadsheets and a little dedicated time. It is not something to be scanned in an airport waiting area. Because this section provides a new approach for many readers, a little more explanation and perhaps some direct mapping from text to examples would be helpful. As is, readers who take time to assimilate all in detail will benefit the most.

Part II addresses crisis management. Information on failure modes and effects and on system mapping may be familiar to many. The section on data collection and analysis merits specific attention, for here is where the hurdles in crisis management lie. The author provides a seven-step model and a frank discussion that clarifies what otherwise could be a careless process. He provides partial metrics that both inform readers and challenge them to think by filling in the missing data.

Hornjak includes an extensive discussion of decisionmaking in which he addresses foundations, processes, and specific tools such as payoff matrices and decision trees. He closes with sound advice regarding constraints, biases, and traps.

Part III on crisis prevention is deceptively short. It contains much wisdom, including the view that prevention is a function of system, organizational, and human factors. The author discusses and integrates all three and follows with a case study that shows concepts in practice.

Many books on project management tell how to do things right. *The Project Surgeon: A Troubleshooter's Guide to Business Crisis Management* takes a different approach. Recognizing that things will go wrong, it tells what to do next. In the real world of uncertainty and potential failure, it is a refreshing, unique, and essential resource.

This book is available from the Project Management Institute bookstore at www.pmibookstore.org.